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I fear life in Soviet jails, Polovchak tells Congress

WASHINGTON [AP]—Ukrainian-born Walter Polovchak told a congressional panel Wednesday that he fears he may spend the rest of his life in prison if he is forced to return to the Soviet Union.

Making his first public appearance in Washington, Polovchak, a 14-year-old who defied his parents and stayed in the United States, expressed gratitude for those who have helped him remain in this country.

"I feel I am part of this country. I feel very free here," he said at a Capitol Hill briefing sponsored by Rep. Peter Peyser [D., N.Y.], who has taken a strong interest in the case.

When asked by Peyser what fate he would face upon returning to the Soviet Union, Polovchak replied, "If I have to go back there right now, I would spend all my life in jail."

Appearing with him was his 19-year-old sister, Natalie, who described official repression encountered by many practicing Catholics and other religious believers in the Soviet Union.

"If the government knows that you are a Christian, first they warn you ... later on they send you to a jail or mental institution," she testified.

PEYSER RELEASED the transcript of an interview he had with a former Soviet KGB officer who had served as a major in the espionage apparatus before defecting to the West.

According to the KGB defector, whose identity Peyser declined to make public, Polovchak could face propaganda "brainwashing" or punishment in a labor camp if he had to return to his homeland.

"His life from the very first day of his ... returning to the Soviet Union, would become, without any exaggeration, really miserable," the onetime Soviet intelligence officer said.

U.S. authorities have granted asylum and permanent residency status to the Ukrainian-born Polovchak, who ran away from his parents in July, 1960, and refused to accompany them when they returned to the Soviet Union. He has been living with a foster family in the Chicago area.

However, a number of legal fights over the boy remain unresolved. In December, 1981, the Illinois Court of Appeals overturned a lower court's decision that had made him a ward of the state. That case is on appeal to the Illinois Supreme Court.

U.S. officials have argued that Polovchak should be allowed to defy his parents and remain in the United States in view of Moscow's record of human rights abuses and the likelihood that he would face harsh consequences if he were forced to return to the Soviet Union.

PEYSER SAID the man he interviewed in June worked in the KGB for a decade and fled to the West about three years ago. He is under "protective custody" of the U.S. government.

Peyser said the former KGB officer had served as an intelligence officer for the Soviets at several posts overseas and had defected while abroad. The congressman declined to give further details, saying more specifics could put the defector in jeopardy.

Initially, Peyser said, he hoped to have the defector testify at Wednesday's session behind a protective screen, but U.S. government officials advised Peyser against doing this.

Asked what he would anticipate in case Polovchak returned to the Soviet Union, the former secret police operative was quoted as saying:

"First thing, the KGB officers will try to brainwash and to force him to cooperate with them to make propaganda, so that the young man will be used to give interviews to several Soviet newspapers, probably to the local TV channel, on the 'atrocities of capitalism.'"

If the youth refuses to cooperate in such a way, the KGB defector said, Soviet authorities may forcefully confine Polovchak to the type of special psychiatric hospital used to incarcerate political dissidents and subject them to massive drug doses.

He said, "If they don't put him into a mental institution, they have a whole variety of other punitive actions, against even teenagers. He can go to a special teenager labor camp, where they claim they treat them with labor and brainwashing by Marxist-Leninist theories."

Once Polovchak turns 18, the defector said, he could face a lengthy term in a regular prison or labor camp on charges of "anti-Soviet propaganda."

"Even if by some miracle he will avoid being confined in a mental institution or put into jail, still he will never be able to graduate [from a] good school in the Soviet Union. He will never be able to get a job which needs [official] clearance," the former KGB officer said in the transcript released by Peyser.